Inmates can't be forsaken

By **James Alan Fox**
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On the eve of Katrina's assault on the Louisiana coast, I was relaxing with a colleague at a Texas saloon as a band of local jammers performed a folk classic:

There is a house in New Orleans

They call the Rising Sun . . .

Our conversation quickly shifted to my friend's efforts convincing his throw-caution-to-the-wind sister to flee her New Orleans home. We speculated about how far she might travel on the congested roadways heading north, while the band played on:

I'm going back to New Orleans

To wear that ball and chain

Notwithstanding debate over whether the song describes a brothel, casino or jail, it got me thinking: What is being done with prisoners? Are they being evacuated?

Fortunately, Louisiana's state correctional facilities are all inland – sites chosen more for their lower land value than for a lower risk of storm surge. However, the many parishes that comprise the Bayou region operate local jails for misdemeanants, criminals with drug and property offenses not serious enough for incarceration at state prisons, and pretrial detainees.

With Katrina aiming straight for New Orleans, the Department of Corrections welcomed to various inland facilities some 700 inmates from jails in parishes projected to face the brunt of the storm. The St. John and Plaquemines parish prisons, among others, were emptied to ensure the safety of those under correctional care.

Not so for the Orleans Parish Prison, a massive institution housing 6,500 inmates, making it the nation's ninth largest jail. Apparently, Sheriff Marlin Gusman deemed it unnecessary to transfer the inmates, despite strong encouragement from the governor and other officials for everyone to evacuate.

It is difficult for those of us outside the swath of Katrina's devastation to imagine the despair and frustration of the survivors. Millions of Americans watched in dismay as the Superdome was transformed into a ``prison,'' as it was characterized by one angry resident marooned for days without enough water, food or sanitation.

But the media were virtually silent about a different class of prisoners – the actual ones locked in cells at the mercy of elected officials making an arbitrary decision about whether to evacuate.

Many observers have focused on those residents who were too poor, too old, too sick or maybe too stupid to evacuate in advance of Katrina. But what about the inmates

– those not permitted to leave?

Following the storm, as flood waters rose within the Orleans jail, inmates were more in the dark than almost anyone. They too lacked sufficient food and water, yet couldn't scavenge for sustenance like looters downtown.

They too were unable to call loved ones, yet couldn't go searching for them.

Days after Katrina, the Department of Corrections managed to bus thousands of Orleans Parish prisoners to dry facilities elsewhere. Not surprisingly, some people questioned why prisoners should be rescued before innocent civilians trapped in the Superdome, the Convention Center or their homes.

The inmates disrupted by the storm ``are not all Boy Scouts,'' as one corrections official put it; nor, however, are they vicious murderers. Some are incarcerated for loitering, DUI or speeding. Many are women or juveniles. Some may even be innocent, unable to make bail.

They could be your brother or sister.

Prisoners stranded in area jails, regardless of their transgressions, deserve no less consideration than other victims of this catastrophe. And because their movement, unlike that of my friend's sister, is controlled by public officials, these inmates may deserve special attention. After all, they were at the mercy of two powerful forces – one meteorological and the other political.

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